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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000621

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SUBJECT: SADRIST PARLIAMENTARIAN: JAYSH AL-MAHDI BEYOND
MUQTADA AL-SADR'S CONTROL

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD FOR
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a February 26 telephone conversation, Sadrist Council of Representatives member Kusai al-Suhail told PolOff that the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) is not fully under the control of Muqtada al-Sadr. JAM is not an organized army, al-Suhail said, and "anyone with a gun" can dress in black and take to the streets, claiming to be a member. Local commanders, therefore, do not always heed Muqtada al-Sadr's orders, he said. Muqtada al-Sadr, al-Suhail said, told JAM on February 24 that it should stay off the streets. That some JAM members are still out in force on February 26 shows the disconnect between Muqtada al-Sadr and some local commanders, al-Suhail said.

12. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED: Commenting on the agreement signed by the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) and Tawafuq on February 25, al-Suhail said that it is even more important than the agreement reached the same day with the Muslim Ulema Council. The article of the agreement with Tawafuq that calls on Coalition Forces (CF) to better train and better equip the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to deal with the insurgency is especially important, al-Suhail said. Despite the dangers facing Iraq, al-Suhail was hopeful that Iraqis will heed the Marjaiya and Iraq's political leadership and avert civil war. END SUMMARY.

Not Even Muqtada al-Sadr Controls JAM

13. (C) Kusai al-Suhail told PolOff in a February 26 phone conversation that JAM is not completely controlled by Muqtada al-Sadr. It is not an organized army, al-Suhail said, and does not have a set number of fighters. JAM consists largely of young men who are "loyal to the principles of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr," al-Suhail said. The number of JAM fighters can increase or decrease rapidly, depending on how many young men wish to dress in black and join other JAM members in the streets. Local commanders do not always respond to Muqtada al-Sadr's orders, al-Suhail said. For example, al-Suhail said that the JAM elements that burned the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) headquarters in Basrah on February 22 were acting independently of Muqtada al-Sadr. He noted that on February 24, Muqtada al-Sadr ordered JAM to cease operations, yet as of February 26, JAM patrols still continue in some parts of Iraq such as Sadr City.

ISF Needs Better Training and Weapons

14. (C) Al-Suhail told PolOff the agreement reached by OMS and Tawafuq is a great accomplishment, and one that is even more important than the agreement signed by OMS and Sunni Arab Muslim Ulema Council. Of all the articles in the agreement signed by OMS and Tawafuq, the most important is the fifth article, which states that ISF has not done a good job of maintaining public order. CF should therefore better train and equip the ISF. When PolOff asked if this meant OMS wanted CF to prolong its presence in Iraq to train ISF, al-Suhail said, "No." CF must withdraw from Iraq, but as it does, it should improve the "quality and quantity" of training provided to ISF. "The United States," al-Suhail said, "handles security in Iraq poorly and is part of the problem." The ISF, therefore, should be given the tools it needs to take the lead on security in Iraq, he said.

15. (C) In particular, al-Suhail argued, ISF needs better weapons to fight the insurgents. He said ISF should be given tanks and armored Humvees because the insurgents have weapons more advanced than ISF, including missiles, mortars, and IEDs. The ISF needs armor to confront these weapons, he said. Giving the ISF AK-47s is not enough, al-Kusai argued.

Comment

16. (C) The question that al-Suhail raised is weighing on the thinking of the Sunni Arab leadership. A top Iraqi Islamic Party official told PolCouns February 27 that they are not sure if the Jaysh al-Mahdi will honor the pact they signed with the Sadrist political leadership.

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Dating back to at least his April 2004 uprising against the Coalition Provisional Authority, we have heard mixed accounts about how much Moqtada controls the JAM. We will undoubtedly continue to do so as long as the Sadrist leader and the JAM are factors in Iraq. While some of our contacts have told us that the JAM is a franchise operation with little central control, they tend, like al-Suhail, to be individuals who seek to project a softer image of the Sadrist leader. Claims from such sources that Moqtada is not in full control of the JAM must be viewed judiciously. Arguably, Moqtada's political success (indeed his survival) to date suggests he has great influence over the militia, even if he does not have total operational control. Extra-Governmental armed groups lend themselves to ambiguity over who is in fact in charge. However, the fundamental issue remains the danger groups like the Jaysh al-Mahdi pose to Iraq's stability, especially now.

KHALILZAD